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## The Insufficiency of Facts

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# The Insufficiency of Facts

by **T. Scott Plutchak** (Director of Digital Data Curation Strategies, University of Alabama at Birmingham) <tscott@uab.edu>

Writing in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2004, **Ron Suskind** recounted a conversation he'd had two years previously with an unnamed senior advisor to then president **George W. Bush**. The advisor described **Suskind** as belonging to the "reality-based community," people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." He went on, "that's not the way the world really works anymore... when we [i.e., the Bush administration] act, we create our own reality."<sup>1</sup>

In 2005, **Stephen Colbert** coined the word "truthiness" on the debut episode of "The Colbert Report." It referred to the quality of believing something that we think ought to be true, rather than what actually is. **Merriam-Webster** named it 2006's word of the year. It was amusing.

"Reality." "Truth." The concepts have always been more elusive than we care to admit. Over the course of the past year, however, as the presidential campaign unfolded, the ability to distinguish fact from fiction appeared to many to have reached a crisis point. From every corner of the political spectrum came accusations of lying. Polls showed that neither of the major presidential candidates was considered trustworthy by a majority of the electorate. The term "fake news" was coined to indicate stories that were known to be false by the people who initially spread them, but it quickly became an epithet for any news story that one disagreed with. Even the definition of "fake news" became a matter of dispute. People who might identify as members of the reality-based community are now alarmed at a presidency that appears to be quite comfortable, and successful, pursuing an agenda based on "alternative facts."

Social media have been widely blamed and so there are calls for Facebook or Google or some other technology juggernaut to sort through the murk. The hope seems to be that if there were some reliable mechanism for separating fake news from true news, people like those who believe that **Hillary Clinton** is running a child prostitution ring out of a Washington, DC pizza parlor would quickly realize that they've been deceived and would drop their suspicions. The facts will set them free.

If only it were that simple. The epistemological problem goes far deeper. How do we know? That is, how do we know anything? Where is the porous boundary between knowledge and belief?

It was during the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, that the concepts of Western science were developed and codified to create a method for understanding the world. It was rooted in the principle that there was indeed an objective reality to be known, and that the scientific method laid out by **Descartes** and those who came after him was the way to understand that reality. That way of compre-

hending the world gave rise to modern science and engineering, with all its technological marvels (along with an unprecedented capacity for inflicting misery and destruction). Enlightenment theories of governance gave rise to democratic institutions and societal values based in notions of inalienable human rights. Scholarly journals, advanced librarianship and professional journalism were key elements of the infrastructure.

For the next few centuries, the press (and other media), the reins of government and, to a significant extent, the levers of Western capitalism, were all controlled by people who accepted this view. There was a broad consensus of the nature of what was real and true, and who or what could be believed. **Walter Cronkite**, a television news reader, could achieve the status of the most trusted man in America.

There were always outliers. Conspiracy theorists who believed the moon landing was a hoax, the Illuminati were covertly organizing the New World Order, fluoridation is a nefarious plot to make a passive population easier to control, and many more, going back through centuries.

And there have always been people for whom the truths of their religions were more reliable than what science seemed to claim. They argued against evolution and for an ethical system that was scripture based. **Molly Worthen** describes the "biblical worldview" that provides the grounding for many evangelicals.<sup>2</sup> I recall reading many years ago an interview with a high school senior who, when faced with having to choose between evolution and creationism, decided in favor of creationism because it was more in line with the religious principles on which she had always based her life. On what basis might someone persuade her to choose otherwise?

But these divergent views couldn't quite shake the standard consensus because they didn't have sufficient tools to distribute their contrary messages. Then came the internet.

Internet enthusiasts believed that the new communication technologies would liberate us from the control of the elites, democratize information, empower people to make their own decisions. But those who predicted a golden age of people coming together were generally people who believed in the Enlightenment project. They didn't foresee that the internet would be powerfully used by people who did not share those assumptions. Instead of the wisdom of the crowd, more often we have the delusions of the mob.

**Tamsin Shaw** recently reviewed *The Undoing Project: A Friendship That Changed Our Minds*, which discusses the work of **Daniel Kahneman** and **Amos Tversky**, psychologists

who laid the groundwork for our understanding of how little rational thought is actually used to determine our behavior.<sup>3</sup> Marketers of all sorts (very much including political consultants) understand that using emotional triggers is a much more effective way to generate the behavior that they want than appeals to fact and rational argument. There is a great danger that members of the "fact-based community" fail to recognize that they are just as susceptible to these sorts of manipulations as those with whom they disagree, who seem to be basing their beliefs on "demonstrably false" information.

"Demonstrably false." How does one determine that? Conservative commentators like the radio talk show host **Charlie Sykes**, or the recently installed editor of the *Weekly*

*Standard*, **Stephen Hayes**, argue that the assaults on the mainstream media that the right has waged for years have been too effective.<sup>4</sup> Now, rather than treating the media with a healthy and judicious skepticism, too many people are inclined to a kneejerk disbelief. The awareness that all individuals have biases becomes justification for disbelieving everything that is claimed by people whose biases we suspect are different from our own. On the internet, **Breitbart News**, the **New York Times**, **Infowars**, the **Wall Street Journal**, **CNN**, **FoxNews**, and every other site purporting to bring you the facts suffers the same deficits of credibility.

Journalists, librarians, and scholars across all disciplines have, as part of their professional ethics, a dedication to objectivity. We are supposed to focus on facts and not allow our personal views of the way we wish the world to be to affect our professional practice in describing and organizing and understanding the way the world is. That objectivity has never been perfect. But there was a general consensus among the professionals in those groups, that was generally shared by the public at large, that professional practice usually approached the standard. A certain degree of healthy skepticism was always wise, but it was safe to treat what was presented as journalistic or scientific fact as generally reliable. There was a trust that the people engaged in those professions were genuinely doing their best to achieve that objectivity.

Over the past twenty years, that trust has substantially eroded. These days, many people believe not only that such objectivity is unachievable, but that people engaged in those professions aren't even really trying, that the claims to objectivity are deluded at best, if not actually deceitful. Throughout the political campaigns, for example, the *New York Times* was criticized from all sides. The **Bernie Bros** accused it of intentionally undermining

*continued on page 20*



## The Insufficiency of Facts from page 18

the **Bernie Sanders** campaign in order to advance **Hillary Clinton's** candidacy. **Clinton** supporters complained it was not being hard enough on **Donald Trump**, out of a misplaced desire to appear to be balanced and objective. Every media outlet, mainstream or otherwise, was similarly attacked by those who believe that everyone has an agenda.

Once that trust in the media has been eviscerated, how does one make decisions about what to believe? Confirmation bias takes over and even if we think we are conscientiously searching for facts and making informed decisions, we are constantly cherry-picking to build arguments that support what we already believe.

Facts matter, but they're insufficient. They don't compel belief. We leap from facts to the conclusions we want to be true. As an editor and a reviewer I've often found the weakest part of a paper is its conclusion. The authors may have good data, solid facts, but they claim their data prove things that just aren't there. They see in their data the patterns that they want to see. We come to belief through a complex mixture of factual analysis, values and emotions. Even when people agree on the facts, their values may lead them to very different views about the nature of the reality they're in and the actions they should take.

The scientific consensus is never perfect. Paradigms shift. Sometimes the unlikeliest

theory prevails over time, and what was once thought to be undeniably true is cast aside. But the proper response isn't to throw up our hands and declare that nothing can be believed, and that all scientists are just pursuing their own agendas for their own ends. The myriad problems with peer review should guide us to a healthy skepticism bound to a continuing determination to improve the processes by which we record and evaluate and share scholarly work.

Some librarians argue that we should abandon the pretense of objectivity. Since our decisions are just as affected by biases as anyone else's, we should embrace those biases and develop a librarianship of progressivism that is dedicated to using our professional skills and our institutions to pursue social justice aims. I'm sympathetic. But taken too far, this can lead to an abdication of the essential role librarians play. Provide the full range of information and the tools to make the most of it. The conclusions that people come to have to be their own.

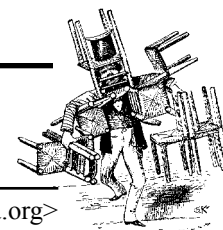
A certain measure of humility is in order. The notion that rooting out fake news and alternative facts will significantly dampen the substantial factional divides in contemporary society is naïve. But it is still an essential step. We can acknowledge our biases and their effect on our judgment, while still being committed to the goal of objectivity that we know we will never quite achieve. The values of the Enlightenment and the view of reality that they engendered have led to vast improvements in the quality of life for millions of people over

four centuries. Imperfect, yes, but still worth defending.

In an age of information inauthenticity, this should compel us to take even greater care to pursue objectivity in our professional roles, while recognizing that as individual people, we are subject to the same currents and emotional manipulations as anyone else. Knowing how to train our judicious skepticism in the direction of the mirror is an essential skill. The work that we do, librarians, scholars, publishers, journal editors, provides the infrastructure for the reality-based community. The upheavals of recent decades, made glaringly stark in the political battles of the past year, should remind us how fragile the bedrock of that community is. Protecting it isn't easy, and the task is never done. 🐜

### Endnotes

1. **Suskind, Ron.** "Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush." *The New York Times Magazine*. October 17, 2004.
2. **Worthen, Molly.** "The Evangelical Roots of Our Post-Truth Society." *The New York Times*. April 13, 2017.
3. **Shaw, Tamsin.** "Invisible Manipulators of Your Mind." *The New York Review of Books*. April 20, 2017.
4. **Rutenberg, Jim.** "The Weekly Standard's Arsenal to Fight Falsehoods: 'Facts, Logic and Reason'." *The New York Times*. March 26, 2017.



## New Metrics for a New Strategy

by **Roger Schonfeld** (Director, Library and Scholarly Communication Program, Ithaca S+R) <rcs@ithaka.org>

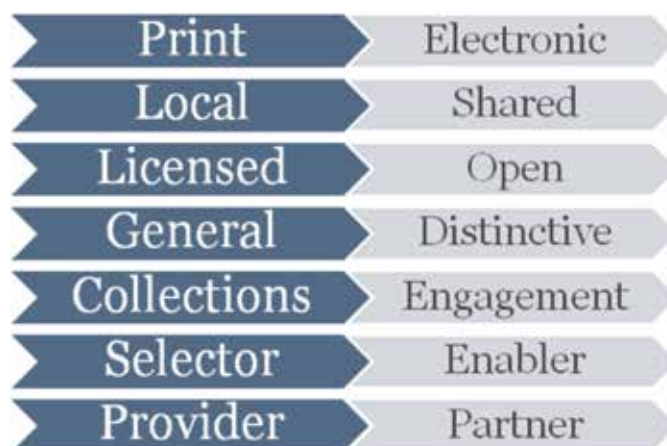
The need for new metrics in research libraries is well established. Some have described this need as being a matter of switching our thinking away from inputs towards outcomes, or away from how much we spend to how much value we create. These are absolutely important ways of understanding why universities should invest in their libraries and a positive direction for metrics. But in parallel, academic research libraries are making a strategic pivot, from an emphasis on general collections to an emphasis on more distinctive collections, partnerships, and services. As the contributions of a library shift, so should the metrics for evaluating its success. We need to shift not only away from an undue attention to inputs, which is complicated enough, but I am kept awake wondering how we move to ways of defining and measuring success that are appropriate to our strategic directions. Here is some preliminary in-process thinking on these topics.

### A New Strategy

Demographic, fiscal, technological, and other types of change are today impacting every type of higher education institution. As higher education institutions look to differentiate themselves, their libraries are equally pursuing distinctive strategies. No longer is it the case (if indeed it ever was) that every library simply wishes to build the largest collection it can afford. Instead, libraries are looking to distinguish themselves for the services that they can provide in support of their parent institution's research and/or educational mission.<sup>1</sup>

Broadly speaking, research libraries are pursuing a wide-ranging transition. Ultimately, they will provide less value by offering general

collections of published materials, duplicated at other institutions, which are increasingly selected through bundled content, vendor profiles, or through an on-demand basis. Even if they spend a substantial amount of resources on these general collections, they recognize that their source of differentiation and value-add will be through distinctive collections and partnerships and services in direct support of research, teaching, and learning. The arc of these transitions is outlined in Figure 1.



continued on page 22